

## THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH ASPECTS OF ENERGY\*

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IT is now two years since the Committee on Public Health of the New York Academy of Medicine charged our Subcommittee on the Public Health Aspects of Energy to organize meetings to examine health issues related to energy sources. We were to review particularly the public health impact and validity of existing and proposed standards, especially as related to New York. The original decision to hold such meetings was made in the belief that physicians would be able to evaluate benefits and risks of various energy sources because physicians are accustomed to treating patients' diseases by weighing risks and benefits. Standards for safety are vital, but they must not be rigid and unenforceable under the guise of virtuous prudence. Many communities are in conflict now, hardly able to meet standards of safety. How hazardous are these violations of standards? We hope this meeting will help to clarify for physicians and others interested in public health the significance of exposure to sulfur oxides and particulates.

At first I thought that nuclear energy would be the most urgent problem to discuss because of the imminence of its use as a practical substitute for oil, and because of its biological hazards and effects. But our subcommittee discerningly elected to consider the urgency of investigating sulfur oxides and particulates, especially because these pollutants affect so importantly the health, the life style, and the economy of New York.

Members of the subcommittee chairing these symposium sessions are: Drs. Harold T. Fuerst, Merrill Eisenbud, and Leonard J. Goldwater. Other

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members of the subcommittee include Dr. Vincent de P. Larkin, chairman of the Committee on Public Health of the Academy, Dr. John Harley, director of the Health and Safety Laboratory of the Atomic Energy Commission, now the Department of Energy; Dr. David Harris, commissioner, Health Services of Suffolk County, N.Y.; Dr. Vaun Newill, director, Research and Environmental Health Division, Exxon Corporation; Mr. William Shore, vice president of the Regional Planning Association; Dr. Harry Sinclair, medical director of the Mobil Oil Corporation; Dr. Samuel S. Sverdlik, director, Department of Rehabilitation Medicine, St. Vincent's Hospital; and Dr. James McCormack, director of the New York Academy of Medicine (ex officio).

Subcommittee meetings have been substantive and fruitful; its members are thoughtful experts, and we are grateful to them for supplying us with their energy and time. During the deliberations of the subcommittee over the past two years, we fortunately were joined by Dr. Maurice E. Shils, who became executive secretary of the Public Health Committee, and the most important member of this energy committee. With his labor and guidance we were able to organize the meeting and to gather today's distinguished panel of speakers. With the exception of one person, everyone who was invited to participate kindly accepted. I thank those who contributed financially to our meetings, including the Duke University Mercury Research Fund, the Electric Power Research Institute, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the U.S. Department of Energy.

Although this subject of sulfur oxides and particulates is of timely significance for New York, the prototypical big city, our Subcommittee on the Public Health Aspects of Energy of the New York Academy of Medicine does not yet feel that this ends its labors and its charge to investigate significant health aspects of energy. After this meeting and the publication of its proceedings we plan to proceed with conferences on other aspects of energy. The health aspects of auto emissions, nuclear energy, coal, oil, and alternative sources will be considered by the subcommittee.

It is fitting that our program on pollution is held today on the Jewish holiday of Purim. Purim celebrates the Old Testament story of Esther, who saved the Jews from extermination by Haman, the advisor to the Persian King Ahasuerus. In one of the commentaries on this biblical story is described the incident of Haman, who is mistaken for the Jew, Mordecai, riding horseback through the street—and one of his own sons throws

garbage on his father, Haman, from a window. Thus the analogy: pollution does not always just fall upon our enemies, or on others—it falls on our own and even on ourselves.

Dr. Vaun A. Newill, director of the Research and Environmental Health Division of Exxon and former White House advisor on energy, a diligent and expert contributor to the deliberations of our subcommittee, will introduce the subject of our conference, sulfur oxides and particulates.